

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

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FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9711

INFO AMCONSUL ALEXANDRIA

AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

USMISSION SINAI

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT EG

SUBJECT: ELITE'S REACTION TO MAY 21 REFERENDUM

1. REACTION OF EDUCATED EGYPTIANS TO SADAT'S MANNER OF CRACKING DOWN ON CRITICS (ALTHOUGH NOT NECESSARILY TO CRACKDOWN ITSELF) UNDER MAY 21 REFERENDUM HAS BEEN ALMOST UNIVERSALLY NEGATIVE. WHILE REACTION IS UNDERSTANDABLE FROM LEFTISTS, WAFDIST AND OTHERS AT WHOM MEASURES DIRECTED, MODERATES AND HIGH-RANKING MEMBERS OF GOVERNMENT ALSO CRITICAL. MAJOR CRITICISMS ARE: (A) NEITHER LEFTISTS NOR WAFDIST PRESENTED REAL THREAT TO SADAT GOVERNMENT; (B) WHILE SOME OF LEFTIST CHARGES AGAINST GOE WERE IRRESPONSIBLE AND MOTIVATED BY PURELY PARTISAN INTEREST, OTHERS WERE JUSTIFIED AND PART- AND-PARCEL OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY; (C) REFERENDUM IS APPLICATION OF EX POST FACTO LAW. LEFTISTS ARGUE THEY HAD NOT VIOLATED EXISTING LAWS, OTHERWISE REFERENDUM WOULD HAVE BEEN UNNECESSARY. SADAT HAS SHOWN HE HAS POWER TO CARRY

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COUNTRY WITH HIM AGAINST OPPONENTS, BUT BY DEMONSTRATING AUTOCRATIC POWER, HE MADE SHAM OF CLAIM TO "STATE OF INSTITUTIONS" AND "RULE OF LAW". IF MORE REPRESSIVE MEASURES NEEDED IN FUTURE, PRECEDENT OF A POPULAR REFERENDUM TO LEGITIMIZE THEM IS NOW FIRMLY ESTABLISHED; AND (D) SADAT HAS HURT HIS IMAGE ABROAD AS LIBERAL LEADER AND UNDERMINED ONE OF TWO PILLARS OF HIS WIDE POPULAR SUPPORT

(OTHER BEING PEACE INITIATIVE).

2. COMMENT: ABOVE ARE VIEWS OF EDUCATED ELITE, WHO ALSO BLAME WHAT THEY CONSIDER SADAT'S "OVER-REACTION" ON-PM SALEM AND SECURITY AUTHORITIES. HOWEVER, THERE IS LITTLE EVIDENCE TO SUGGEST THESE VIEWS ARE SHARED BY MASS OF EGYPTIANS WHO AUTOMATICALLY TEND TO SUPPORT THEIR PRESIDENT. IT MAY WELL BE THAT SALEM ET AL HAVE MUCH BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW TO ASSURE STABILITY. IN OUR VIEW, SADAT WILL SUCCEED IN CURBING HIS OPPONENTS AND STIFLING CRITICISM IN THE SHORT RUN, BUT IN THE LONGER TERM HE RUNS RISK OF UNDERMINING POPULAR SUPPORT HE HAS ENJOYED FROM ALL BUT HIS MOST DETERMINED CRITICS. MATTHEWS

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